

SOUTH SEA ISLANDS

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SOUTH SEA ISLANDS

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WITH A FOREWORD BY
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FOREWORD

BY

ROBERT BURNETT

TAHITI is the largest island of the SOCIETY Archipelago, and PAPEETE, the town on the island with a population of about five thousand people, is the administrative capital of all the possessions of France in the Eastern Pacific Ocean.

These possessions consist of four groups of islands : the Societies, the Marquesas and the Australs being mountainous and of volcanic origin, while the Paumoto or Low Archipelago consists of many hundreds of coral atolls which rise often only a few feet above the water.

The islanders are all Polynesians, although in Tahiti itself a great deal of white blood is to be found, as well as a little Chinese. The danger of the race's extinction, especially in the more distant islands, now seems to be past, for a slight increase of population has recently been noted.

In TAHITI, if you wake long before the dawn, you wake to a great stillness. Each night the deep and permanent silence of the high mountains comes down to the flat inhabited belt of land by the sea, passing through the coconut-palms and on, beyond the black or yellow-white sand beaches, as far as the distant demanding booming of the surf on the encircling coral reef. This changeless rhythm of the reef merely seems to abet the silence in its startling solidity and to deepen it when it enters, at night, into possession of all life. The noises of Papeete continue longer than the scant noises of the countryside, but long before the dawn they too die down and the

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stillness is allowed to own the island while the islanders and their dogs, their pigs and their chickens are asleep.

Shortly before daybreak the silence is suddenly gone. By five o'clock the people begin to move in their huts. In the town, where there is a market to attend, they leave their homes, as soon as the sun has risen, to buy fish, and meat and vegetables from the stalls of the Chinese butchers and nursery gardeners. By seven o'clock the best produce has been bought, to the accompaniment of much noise, and carried away in coconut-leaf baskets, while by eight o'clock the market is finished, the unsold food has disappeared and the Chinese stallholders have returned to their shops.

The selling of fish is alone still in the hands of the Tahitians, for the Chinese, who have almost a monopoly of the island's food production, do not go fishing. Those islanders however who sell fish in the market do not bargain like the Chinese. Their sense of values, which is surprisingly well developed, makes them ask immediately what they consider to be a fair price, which their customers must pay, or go without. If they cannot get their price they appear often unmoved and unconcerned, an attitude towards business which has permitted the asiatics of the island, through their system of mortgages and loans, to obtain control of almost all commerce. The French administration has learned to be indulgent towards the Chinese who, at the New Year, are generous with the presents which they distribute among their European friends.

When the market is over the people go to the Chinese coffee-houses to gossip before returning home, for as the sun gets higher their natural indolence returns. Provision for the needs of the day has been made and their only real or unavoidable work has been done. To-day, their instinct tells them, is the proper time for preparing for to-day, and to-morrow for to-morrow.

With a nature that is incurably happy and a highly developed philosophy of *laissez-faire*, it is but natural that those who live in the town should be affected unfavourably by their too intimate contact

with "civilization", with the rival influences, vices and diseases of the West, of the East, and of America. Controlled by a multiplicity of European functionaries, one for every sixty of the islanders, they have acquired a sad mock overlay of westernization and American ideas, and cannot be considered as representing Tahiti and still less the little that remains, elsewhere, of uncontaminated Polynesia.

In the country districts the life is different, quieter, and the days begin differently. Here the islanders lead a life which is closer to that of the times when they were a free race, although the proximity of Papeete has brought the attractions of civilization within the reach of all. It is necessary to go to seldom-visited islands of the outlying Archipelagos to find no strange influences, no corrugated iron nor Japanese tinned foods.

As soon as it is light some go to find food, some go to wash in pools in the cool streams that come down from the mountains or in the shallow moving water of the streams before they reach the sea. Others wash later, at mid-day, or in the evening. Dressed in a *pareu*, the strip of coloured cotton which the men wear folded round the loins, and the women allow to hang to their knees from above the breasts, they bathe separately or in the same pools. Both men and women are excellent swimmers. They are never naked, for the Polynesian has an unsuspected sense of shame.

The women wash their straight black uncut hair with great care and, when it is dry, dress it with coconut oil to make it shine, plaiting it sometimes for convenience. After bathing, the islanders change their *pareus* and spread out the ones in which they have bathed to dry. The women put on bracelets and necklaces of seeds and shells, red, yellow, white, or brown, and make garlands of fresh flowers. When working or sitting in the sun the men often wear large yellow fibre hats decorated with coloured and woven designs.

The islanders' first meal may consist of *fei*, the wild plantain, with raw fish. They have little housework to do beside sweeping out their huts, for their beds consist only of reed mats on the floor, with a

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coconut log as a head rest. Food must be gathered or caught if the ubiquitous Chinaman does not happen to pass with his provision cart, but in many districts the islanders have learned to be dependent on him and are no longer forced to find their own food.

The Polynesian learns the art of climbing the coconut-palms as a child. If the stem is sufficiently bent he will walk up it, steadying himself with his hands. If the stem is steeper, he will bind his ankles with strips of stout cloth and climb by a succession of jumps, the soles of his feet being turned inwards to grip the stem in the same way as his hands. The nuts are twisted from the stalks and allowed to fall to the ground. The fibrous outer husk is then removed by hitting the husk on the sharpened end of a stake which has been stuck in the earth and when the hard inner shell has been laid bare two or three holes are made in it. The nut is held above the head and the milk is drunk as it pours from it in a thin stream. But, with the progress of "civilization", the ability to climb the palms is being slowly lost for now many of the islanders are too idle to bother, or to learn when they are young, and prefer to knock down the nuts by means of a long stick, while they remain on the ground.

To the Polynesians the coconut-palm is the most useful of all plants. Beside food, the nut provides, when dried in the form of copra, their most valuable export. The leaves are extensively used for the roofing of their huts, being woven while still green into strips which remain rainproof for about two years.

The bread-fruit and the *fei* come next in importance as food. Of the plantain, many varieties—all small and not all very sweet, when compared with the cultivated banana, but of which some are always in season—grow in the mountains and on the flatter land.

The huts are built on a rectangular plan, the walls being made of split bamboo canes or of banana-leaf matting stretched over a wooden framework. At the bottom and at the top of the walls a space is left to allow for light and air to enter. The roofs overhang the walls to keep them dry in heavy rain, while the wooden floors, for the

same reason, are raised a few inches above the ground. Windows, when built at all, are in the form of shutters which can be propped open from inside the hut. Occasionally, the feathery fronds of the *pandanus* are used for the roofs and those who can afford this form of thatch employ it, for a *pandanus* roof may last as long as ten years. The insides of the walls are usually left unlined, but sometimes they are covered with sheets of *tapa*, a material, stained with coloured designs, that is made from coconut fibre, or they are covered with mats similar to those which are spread on the floors. Oil lamps, barometers, and European doors and handles are very frequent signs of the arrival of civilization in Polynesia.

The limits of a Polynesian family are difficult to define. A woman is the *vahiné* of a man, he is her *tanté*. But the polygamous instincts of both women and men frequently leave the true parenthood of a child in doubt. Missionaries of all sects have endeavoured, not always with success, to change these instincts. Since also the practice of the adoption of children of relations and of strangers is widespread, the children of a Polynesian family may or may not be related to each other or to their parents. A child may recognize several women as its mother—aunts who may have wet-nursed it, the adoptive mother who has brought it up, its real mother whom it may not have seen for many months.

Each family owns at least one dog, and Tahiti is overrun by mongrels of all colours, and of all sizes and shapes. They are generally well fed and treated, but are also often the butt of any sudden fit of passing spleen. Small black pigs live in a half-wild condition in the bush. Sometimes they are treated as domestic pets, being tied by one leg to a stake or tree near the huts. They are prolific enough to provide the islanders with their favourite dish—roast sucking-pig. Small chickens are also kept, while on some of the smaller islands there are goats.

The islanders' indolence, which climate and the abundance of food have fostered, vanishes before the least happening which can

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be construed as an excuse for a feast or celebration. Apart from the more usual occasions, a birth, a marriage, or the celebration of the French National holiday on July 14th, unexpected events are eagerly made the occasion for a feast. Friends may arrive unannounced from a neighbouring village, a stranger may come to pass a few days in the district, or a visitor, preferably a European, may announce his departure.

All those who live in the neighbourhood, warned by the "Coconut telegraph", will come of their own accord to be present at a farewell party, bringing with them as many *fétis* as they know. A *féti* is an individual who stands in a special and almost mystical position with another islander and may be a man or a woman, a relation, or a friend, or an acquaintance whose claim to the position is merely founded on the fact that he comes from the same part of the island—or of another island—as the other. A *féti* must be entertained when it is possible to do so and in consequence the number of guests at a feast is never, for certain, known in advance.

The celebration before the departure of someone who has gained the easily acquired affections of the islanders would consist most probably of a feast in the evening, but preparations for the feast would begin early and continue desultorily all day. Fish, and if possible octopus, would be caught in the lagoon, the blue clear sea between the shore and the reef, being netted, or speared by the islanders as they swim under water, wearing goggles and clasping a short pronged stick in their hand. Sometimes the spearing is done from the *pirogues*, the islanders' narrow boats which are propelled by paddling and balanced by an outrigger. Sucking-pigs and chickens would next be killed, and a quantity of vegetables collected: *taro*, *pota*, yams.

When the food is ready for cooking, the cooking-place is prepared. In a specially dug hole in the ground, lined with blocks of dead coral, the dried fibrous husks of coconuts are placed. They are then lit, producing a great heat but little smoke. When they are burnt out

the ash is scraped away. The coral blocks are now very hot and in the hole is laid everything that is to be cooked, sucking-pigs, chickens, *fei* and vegetables. The food is wrapped in separate bundles in fresh banana or *pota* leaves and covered with long strips of fresh leaf and a layer of earth. Sometimes the food is laid together unwrapped. For about two hours the oven remains covered ; then about half an hour before sunset the food is ready and the feast can begin.

A sunset in Tahiti, particularly if it is seen with the small neighbouring island of Moorea silhouetted against it, is so spectacular that it can never be forgotten. Red, rose and scarlet shafts, that too rapidly shorten and fade, are thrown across the sky, tinting any cloud that may be hanging to the peaks of the mountains. The half-mile breadth of the lagoon appears even calmer than during the day, reflecting the fading light from its dark surface. Occasional coral rocks break the reflection with their black heads. The blue light in the mountains grows deeper as the sky loses its colour. Then the stars appear with their almost tinselly brilliance, or the moon rises and illuminates the sea and the islands with its white light.

Although the islanders have lost none of their love of dancing, nor the ability to play the guitar and sing, it is now only for the celebrations of the National Holiday, or possibly to welcome some new Governor, that the people put on the traditional dried leaf skirts and coloured head-dresses which in the free past had ritual significance. On such occasions those who watch dress themselves, however, in their best European clothes : Mother Hubbard dresses over cotton under-wear for the women, white trousers and sleeveless cotton shirts for the men. On such days there are also races, and processions in the large double *pirogues* whose use is now obsolete. With these clothes they still wear wreaths of fresh flowers, the men as much as the women, placing them round the head or neck—white *tiaré* flowers or red hibiscus, often several of varied lengths together. In the evening the scent is often almost overpowering, for, with the exception of the

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hibiscus, nearly all the flowers which are used have a strong perfume which becomes stronger after sunset.

The making of flower wreaths is done by the women at any time of the day when there is nothing else to do, so that the islanders are seldom seen unadorned. A flower is also commonly worn behind the ear and a tradition has arisen, possibly as a colourful explanation to tourists, that to wear a flower behind the right ear denotes a free heart and behind the left that the wearer has a friend.

Wearing garlands and bringing others to give as presents, the guests at the farewell feast begin to arrive long before sunset. Those living at a distance, and who own horses, ride in seated on fresh banana leaves in place of a saddle, without stirrups and with reins of home-made rope, or in a buggy with several of their relations. Others come on foot, having begun their journey earlier in the day, playing guitars and singing as they walk. Before the feast begins rum punch is drunk, or native beer, an illegal but potent brew of fermented fruit juices, so that when the food is ready some of the guests may be a little intoxicated.

After uncovering the oven the various foods are divided up among the guests. Raw fish, soaked in the fresh juice of limes and coconut milk, is eaten with relish at all meals. The guests sit cross-legged on the ground in two rows facing each other, sometimes under a roof of fresh leaves and flowers. The eating is done with the hands, but is incessantly interrupted by the playing of guitars which are passed from one eater to another, for each man can play as well and as easily as his neighbour.

When the eating is over there is more rum punch or more beer to be drunk, or a red French wine in honour of a European. Then the singing begins. The favourite songs are those with a somewhat salacious narrative, which might surprise a European but which appear inoffensive to the islanders. The guitars accompany the voices, while the rhythm varies with each song. One or more men or women will sing according to the popularity of the song. Other songs, sung

unaccompanied, and deriving from the Protestant hymns which the missionaries have taught the islanders, are reserved for more solemn occasions.

With the singing the party has entered its final stage, but no time is ever fixed for its end. Coconut-husk flares, stuck in the earth or in the sand, give light to the scene when the sun has set, while the lights and the sound of the singing may encourage others to join in who may happen to be passing along the coast road and who may be strangers to the rest.

When the guests have sung enough, a guitar may begin a dance rhythm and, with a great abandon which the rum has encouraged, a woman will get to her feet and dance alone. After a few moments she chooses a man by dancing before him. He in turn gets up and dances opposite her, without touching her. Surprising and possibly suggestive to Western eyes, the rapid and sinuous paces of the dance will continue until the couple is too tired, too amorous, or too gay to dance further. But others quickly take their place. Later, those who cannot return to their homes will sleep where they are, sitting, or among the bushes or trees if they have wandered away in search of privacy.

Gradually, as the feasters begin to fall asleep, the inevitable silence of the Polynesian night begins to gain possession of the beach, where the flares have burnt out, and of the clearing where the feast has taken place. The howling of frightened or excited dogs may from time to time break in on the stillness, but, as must always happen, long before daybreak all sound has ceased.

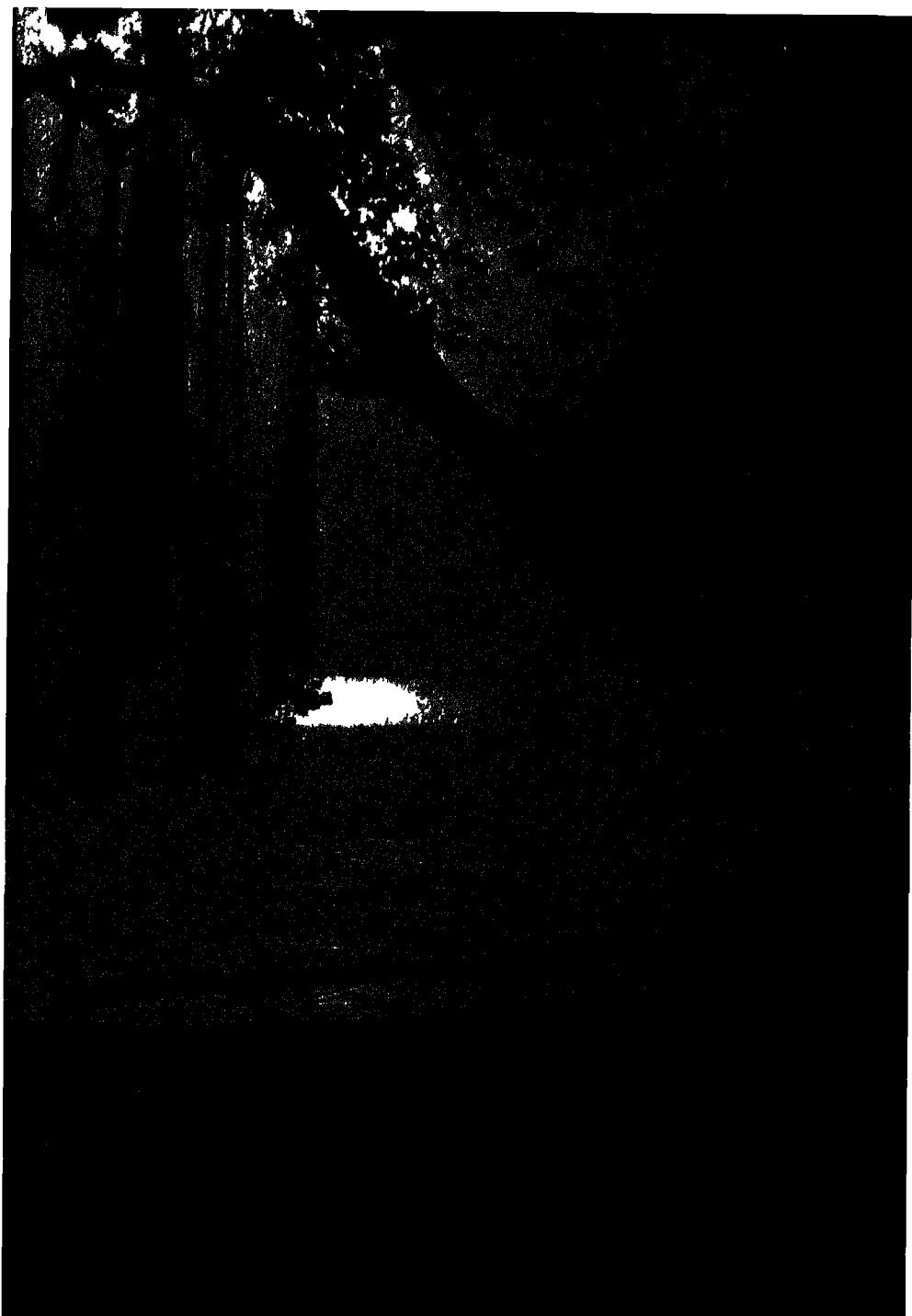
Next day, the departing guest is gone and the monthly mail-boat in which he has sailed will have broken many friendships. Those who have said good-bye at the harbour, and who have covered him with garlands, will remember and be sad for a time, a day perhaps, but their interest in the new arrivals, whom the mail-boat will have left behind, will allow them to forget quickly and easily and they will be content with the belief that the person who has left them will

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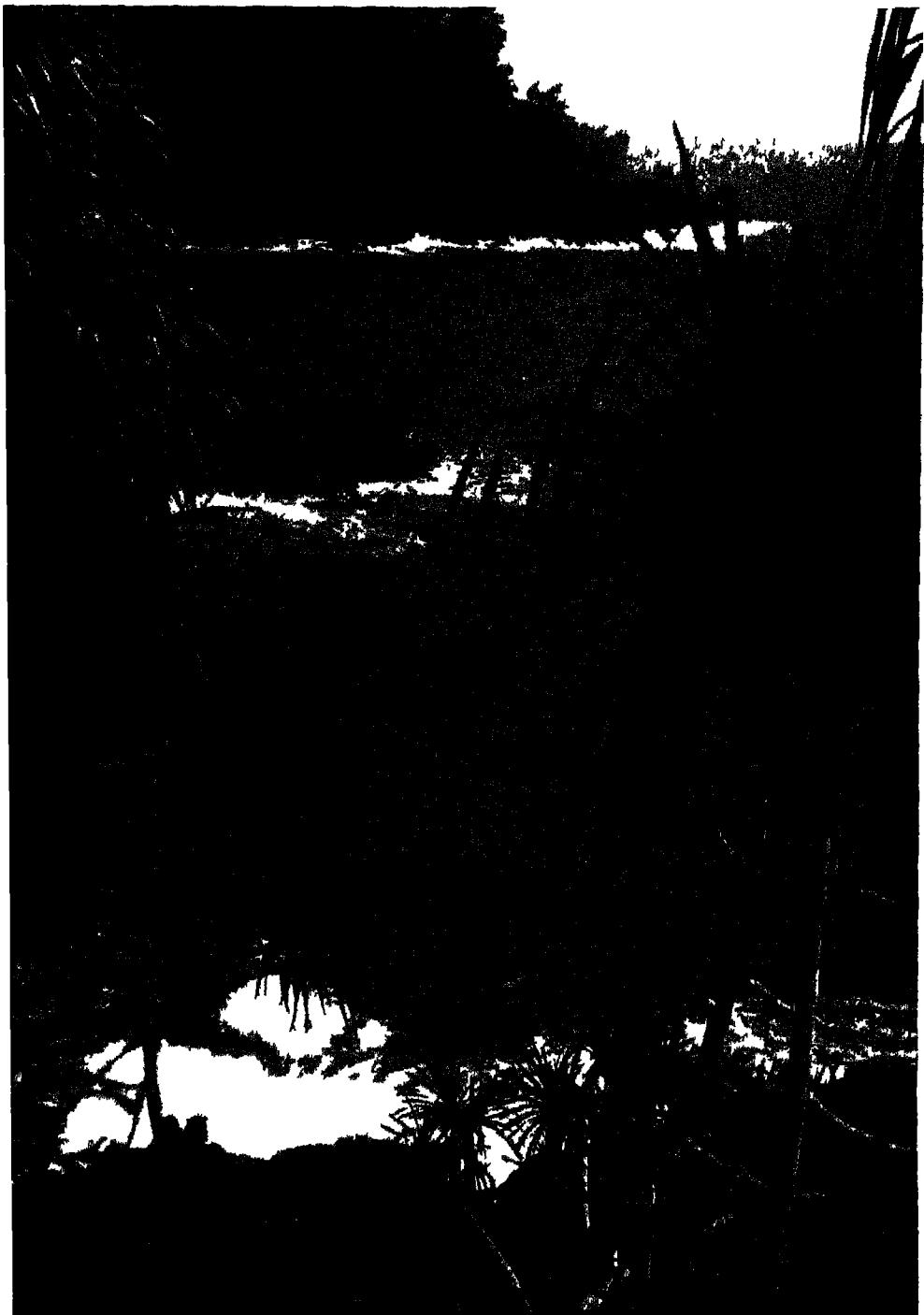
one day return to live among them again. No man ever leaves Tahiti, or any island of Polynesia, without many reiterated promises to return, and the islanders believe, if he has eaten the *fei*, that he must inevitably do so. As the ship passes out of the lagoon into the open sea, he takes a flower wreath from his neck and throws it on to the water so that it may be carried back on to the coral reef and make his return more sure.



1. *The boat approaches an island*



2. *Sunset*



3. *Tahiti*



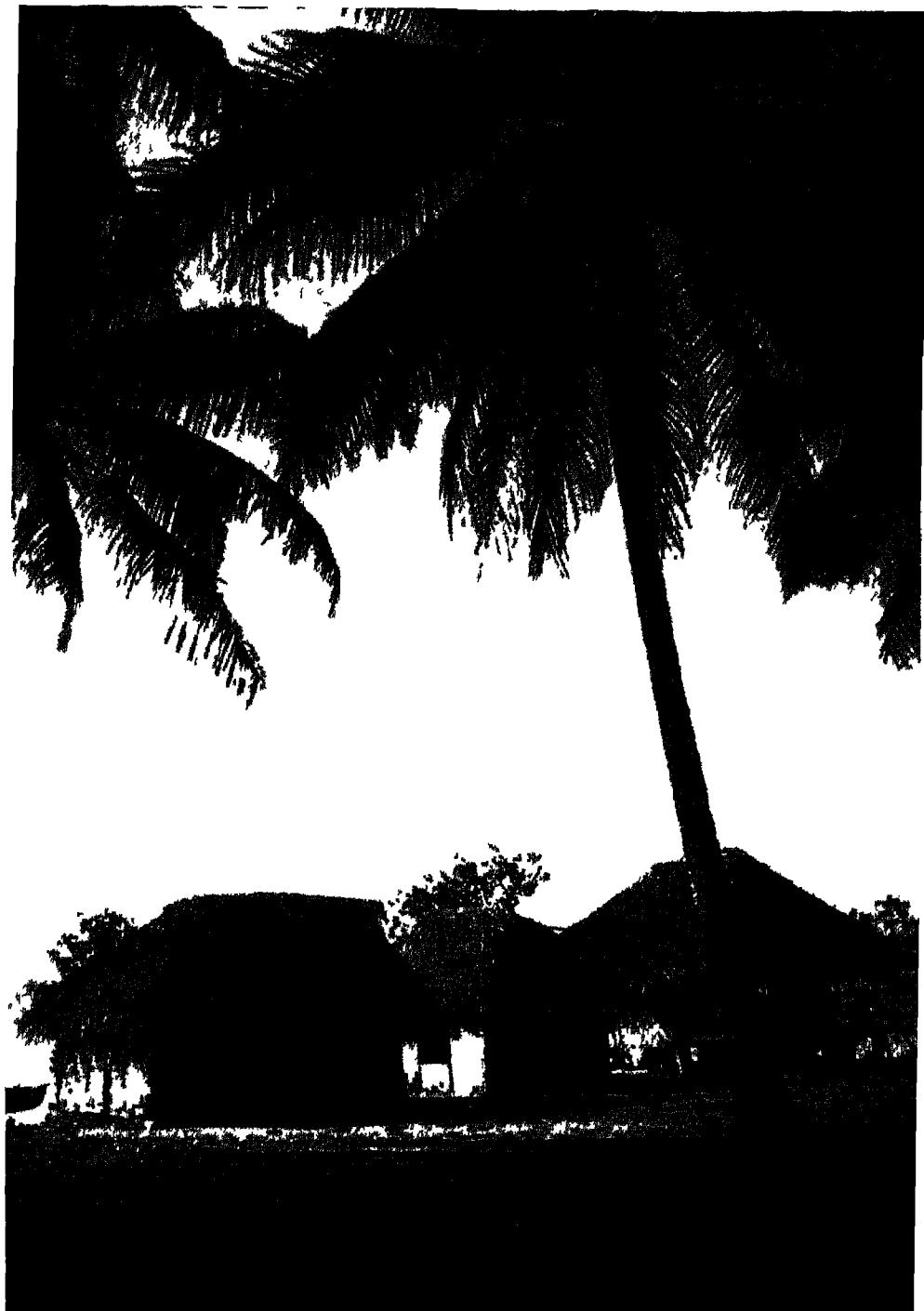
4. *Woman of Rapa*



5. *Man of Rapa*



6. *Bay of Payenoo in Tahiti*



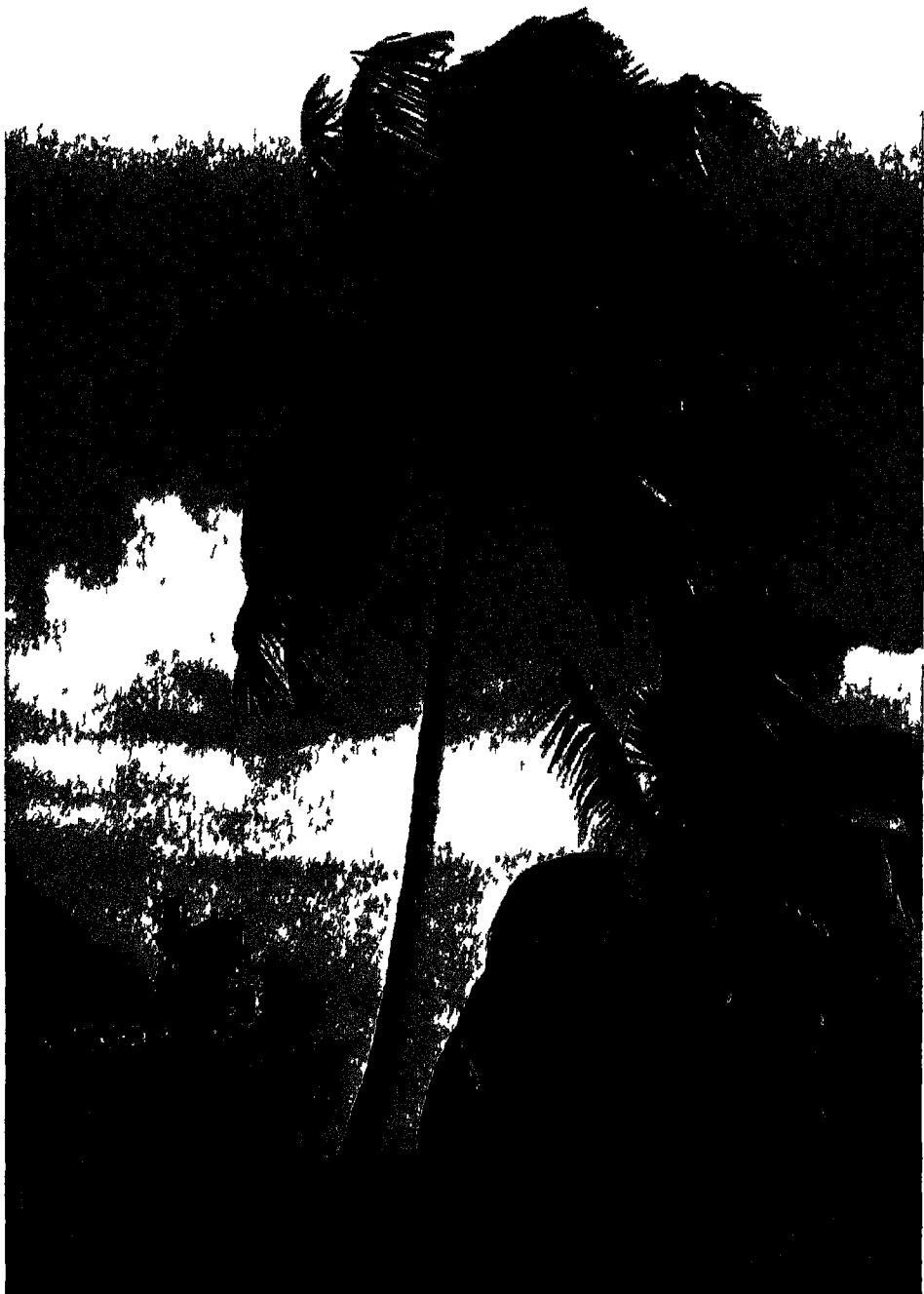
7. *Native Huts*



8. *Two men of Rapa wearing garlands*



9. *Weaving coco-palm leaves for a hut*



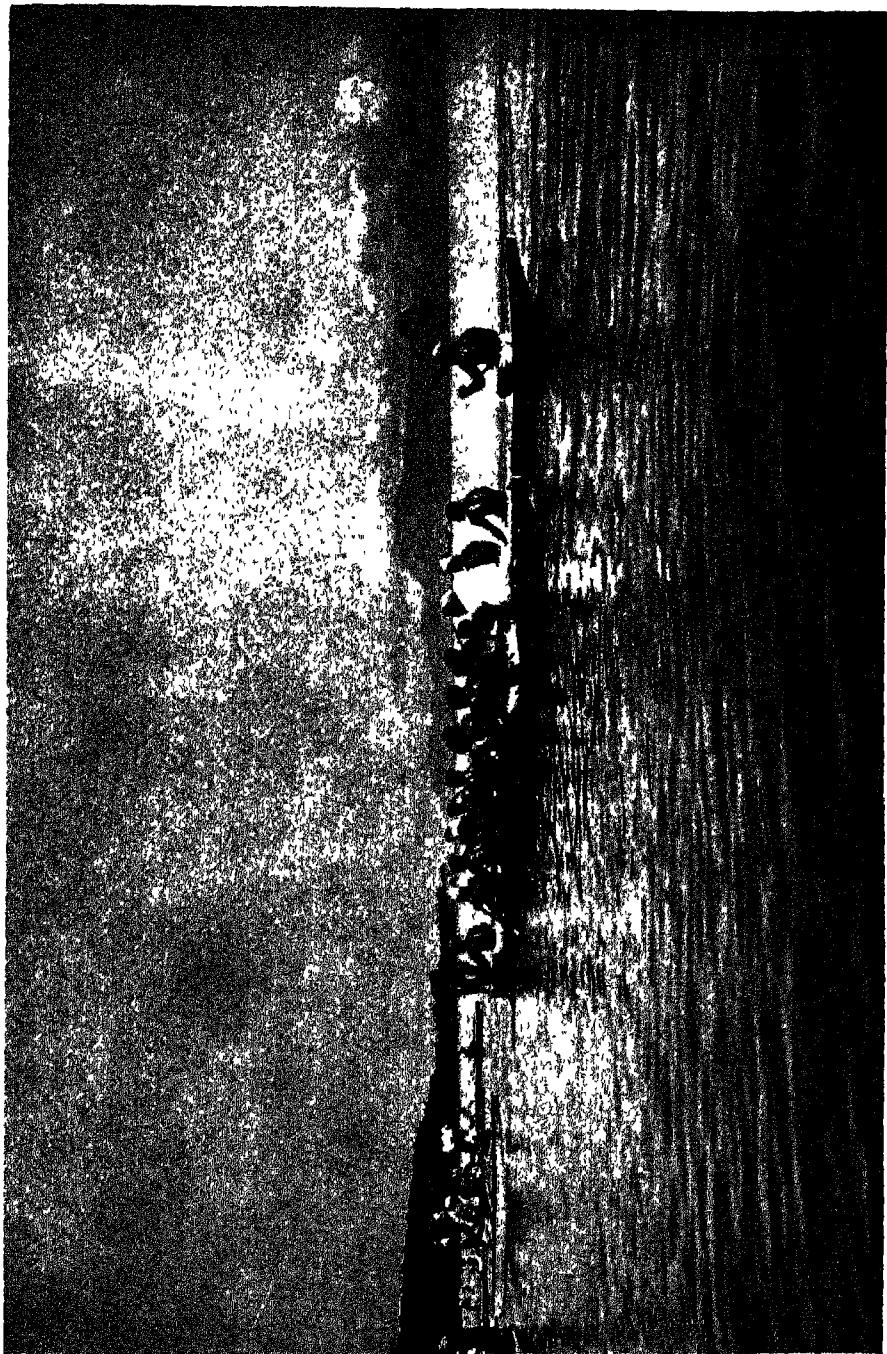
10. *Climbing the coco-palm to look for coconuts*



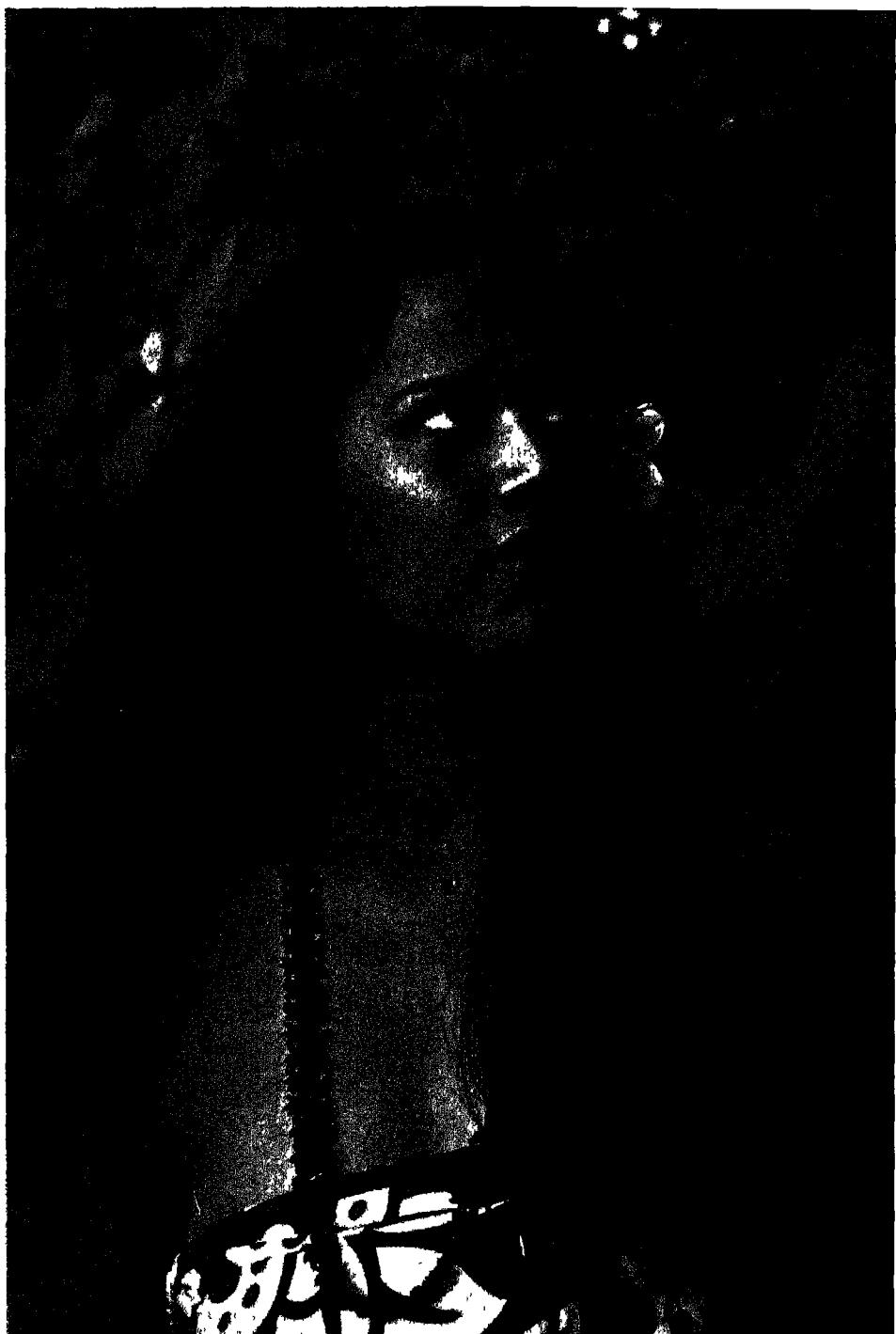
11. *Climbing the coco-palm*



12. *Tahiti—a race between two native canoes*



13. *Tahiti*—a big native double canoe; in the background the outline of the neighbouring island, *Moorea*



14. *Woman of Tahiti*



15. *Woman of Tahiti*



16. *Tahiti—dance by women*



17. "Otea"—native dance in Tahiti



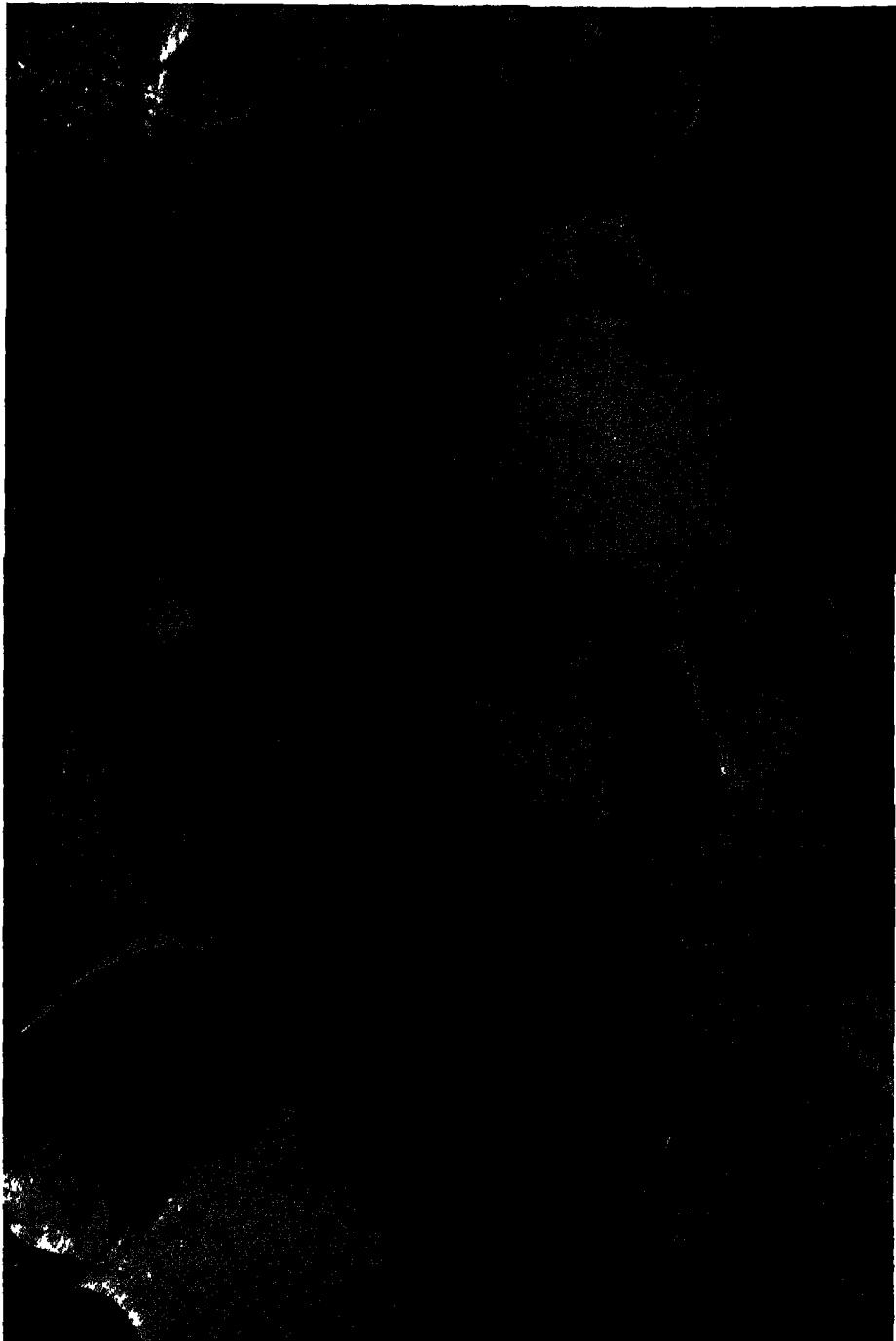
18. *Laundry*



19. *Festival at Tahiti*



20. *Masculine type*



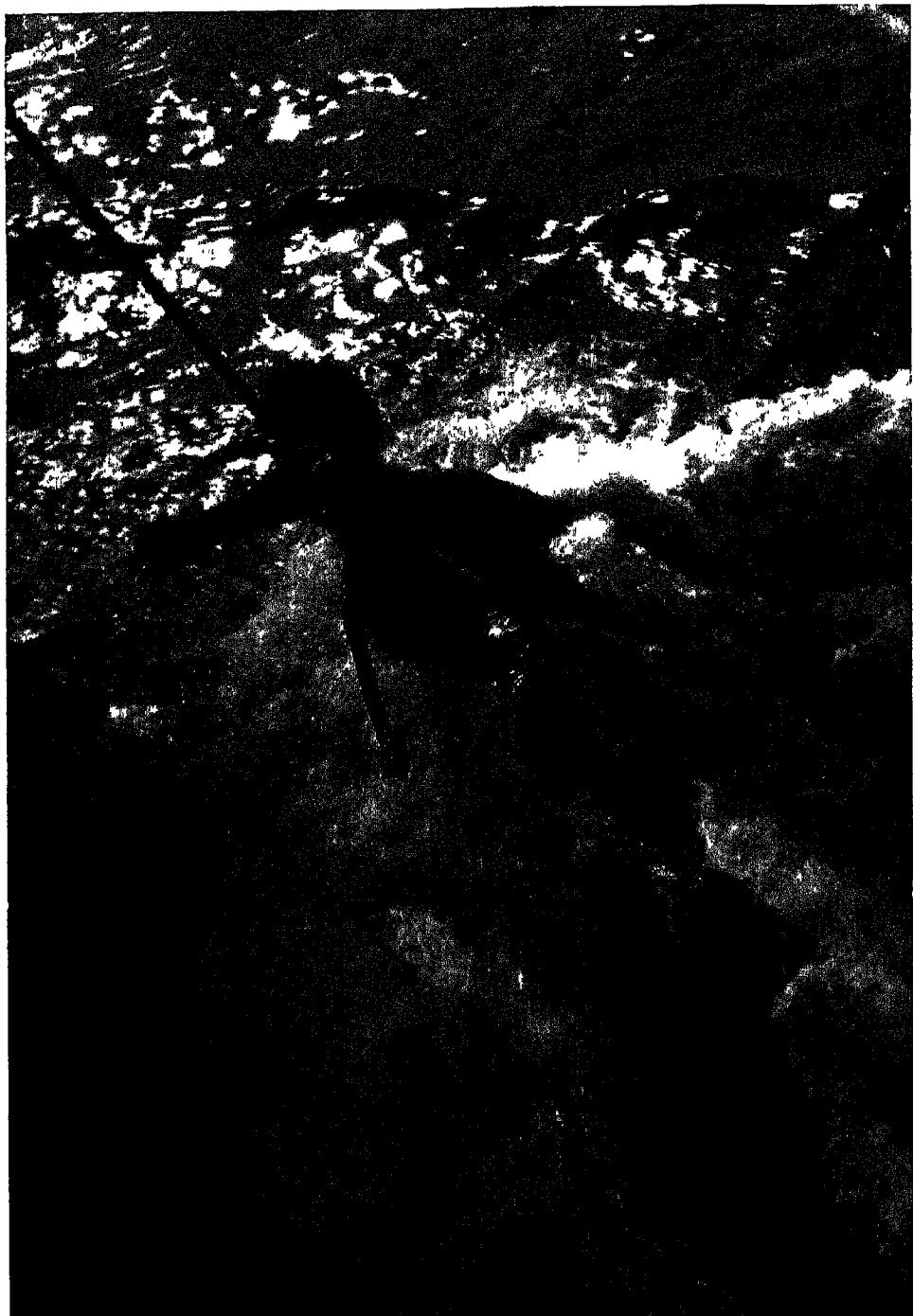
21. *Feminine type*



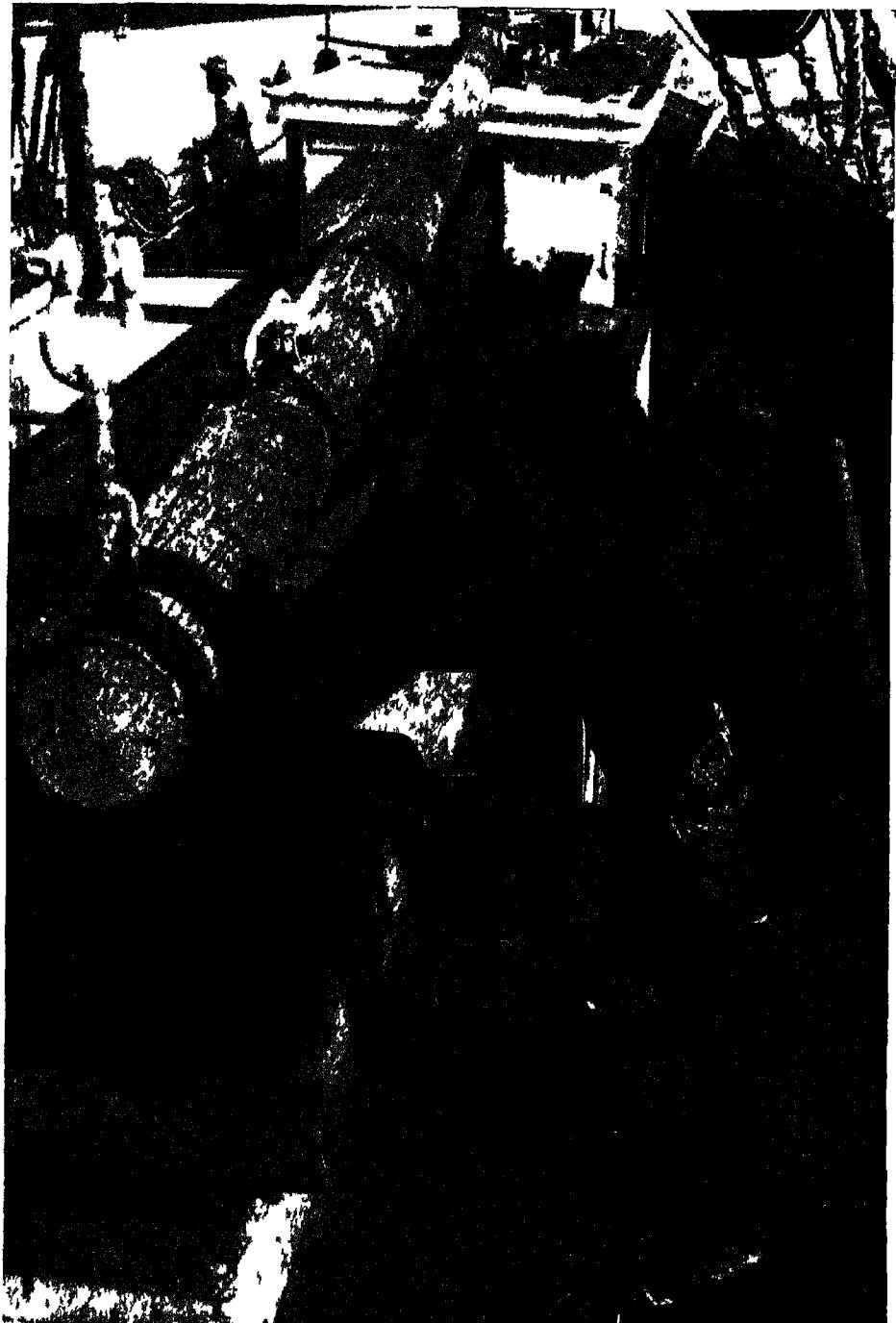
22. *Fish-spearing*



23. *Fish-spearing*



24. *As the boats sail from island to island, one of the favourite distractions of the natives consists in being pulled along through the water at the end of a rope*



25. *On board a schooner*



26. *Men of Rurutu*



27. *Women of Rurutu*



28. *Children*



29. *Children.*



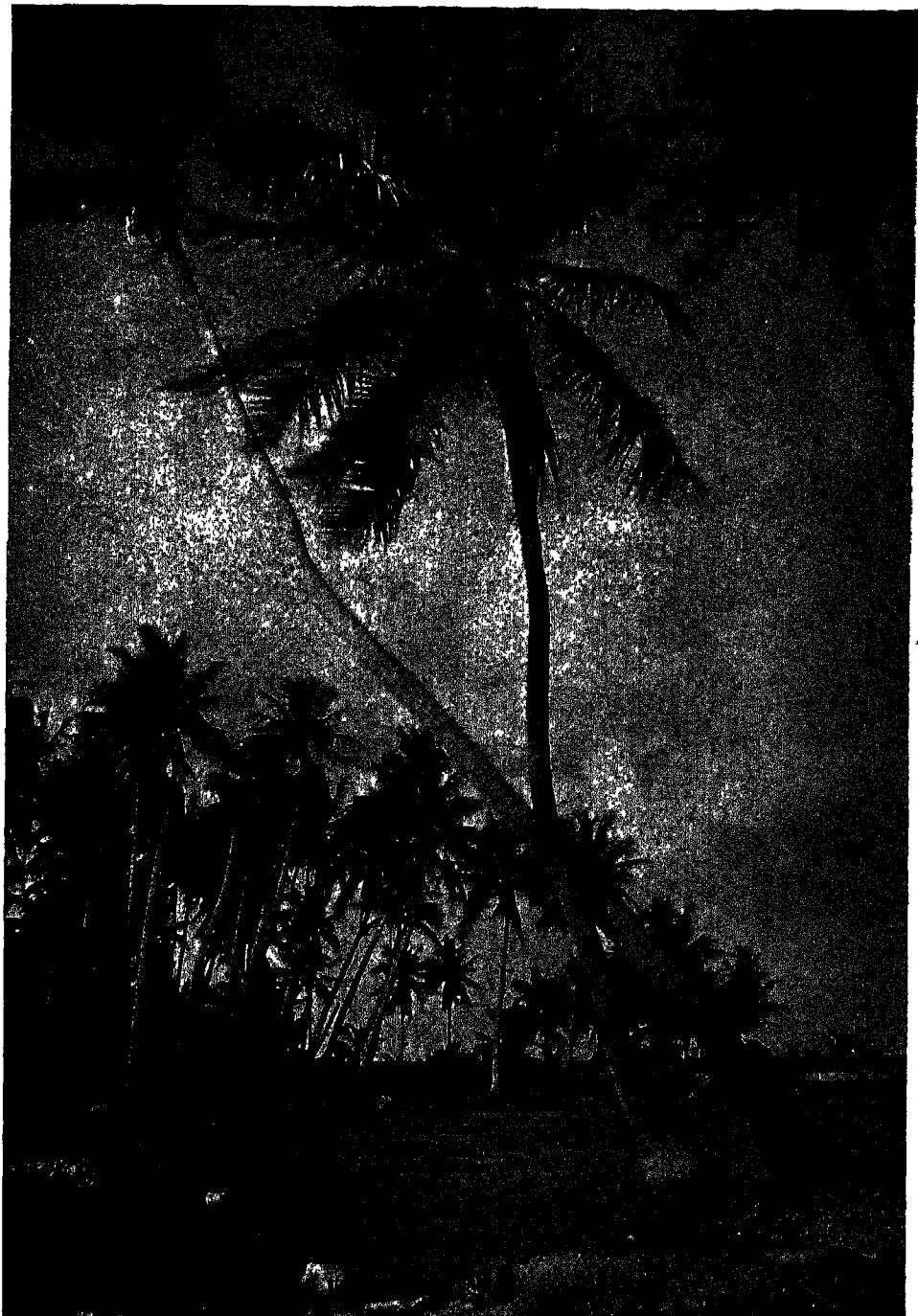
30. *Island of Rurutu—cutting up a whale*



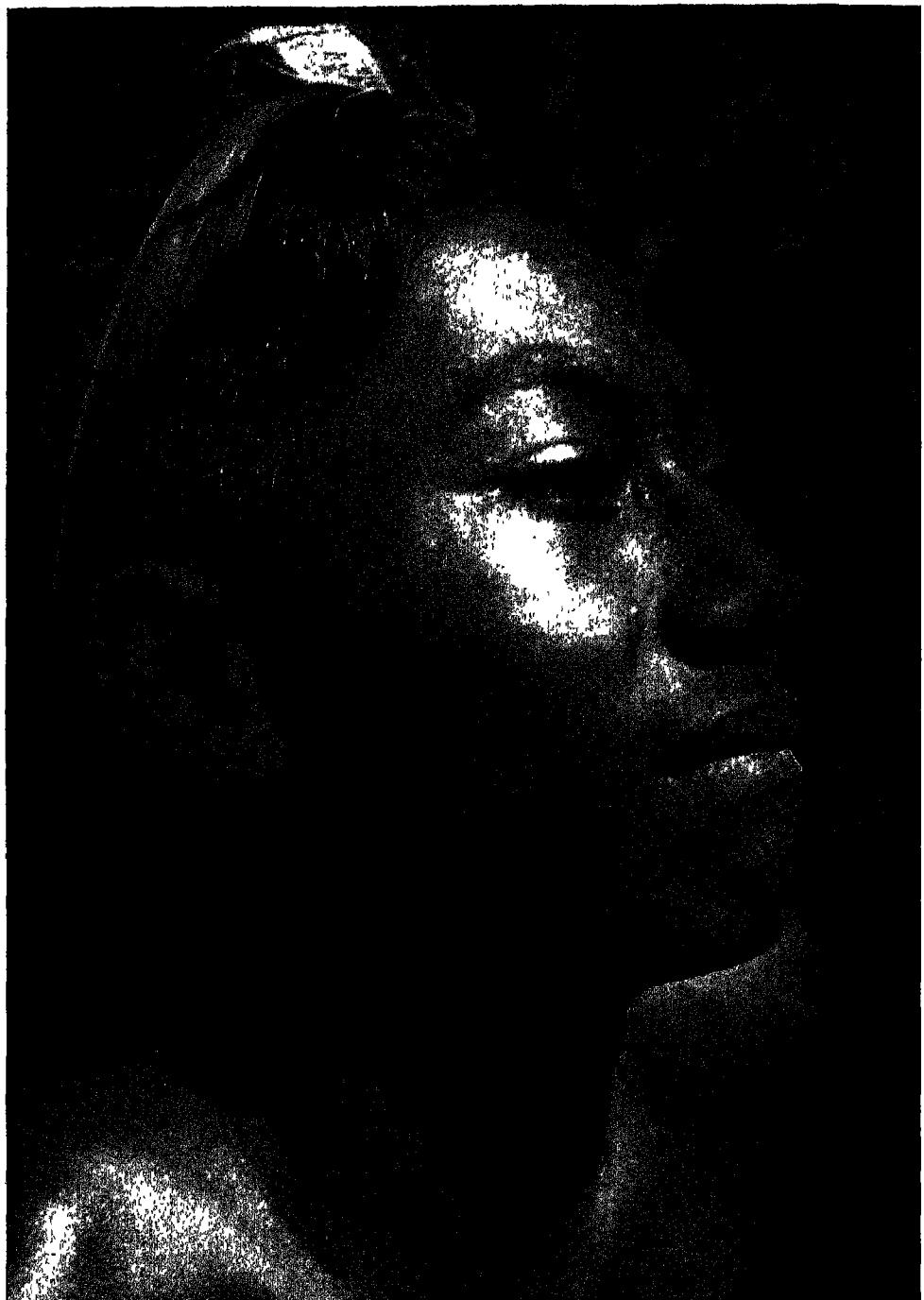
31. *At Rurutu—cutting up a whale*



32. *Old woman of the island of Amanu*



33. *The island of Amanu*



34. *Masculine type*



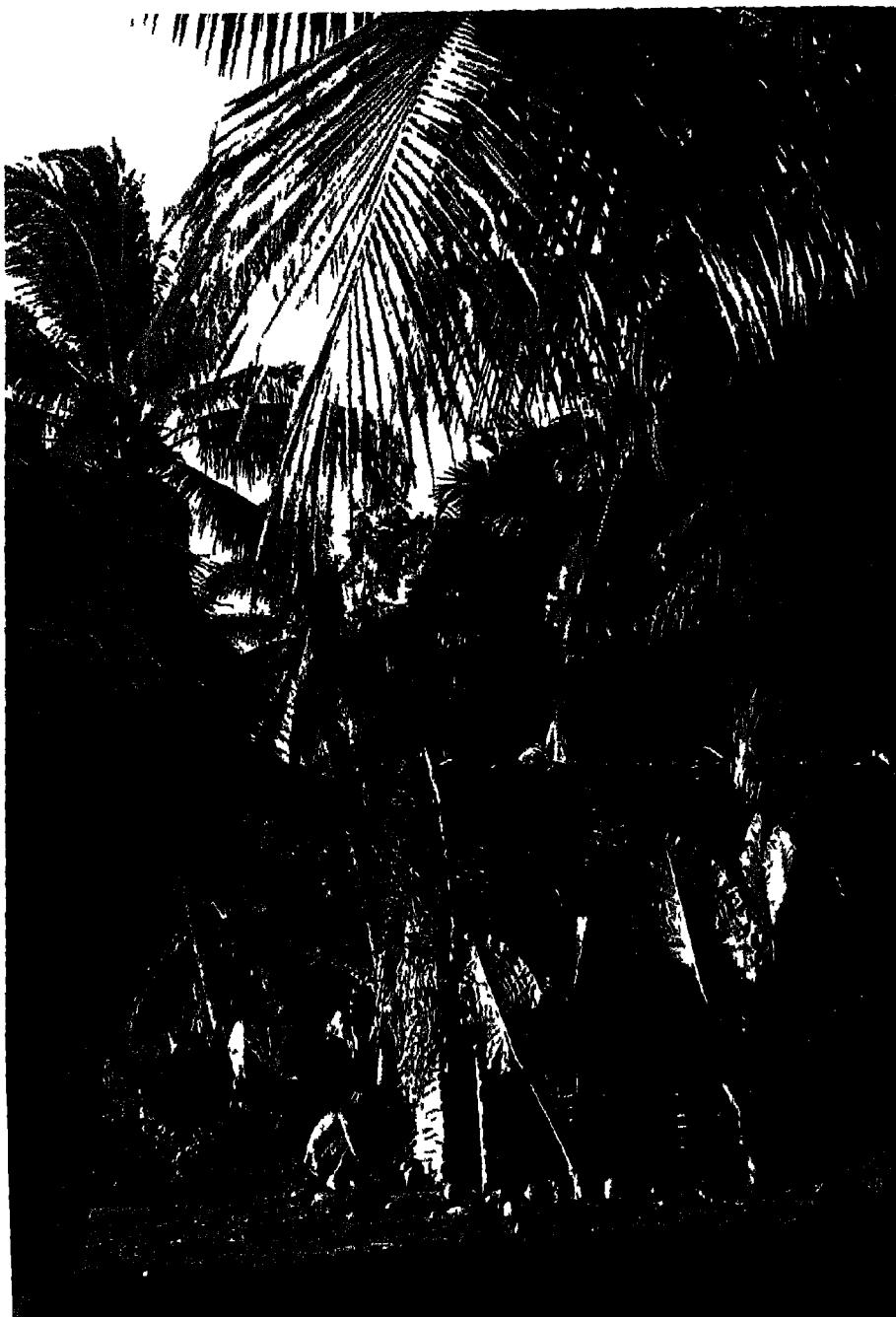
35. *Feminine type*



36. *Carrying home the banana-bunches*



37. *Riding on the island of Rurutu*



38. *Vegetation*



39. *Removing the husk from a coconut*



40. *Keeping vigil over a dead woman in Rurutu*



41. *Large native hut on the island of Tubuai*



42. *Natives of Rurutu*

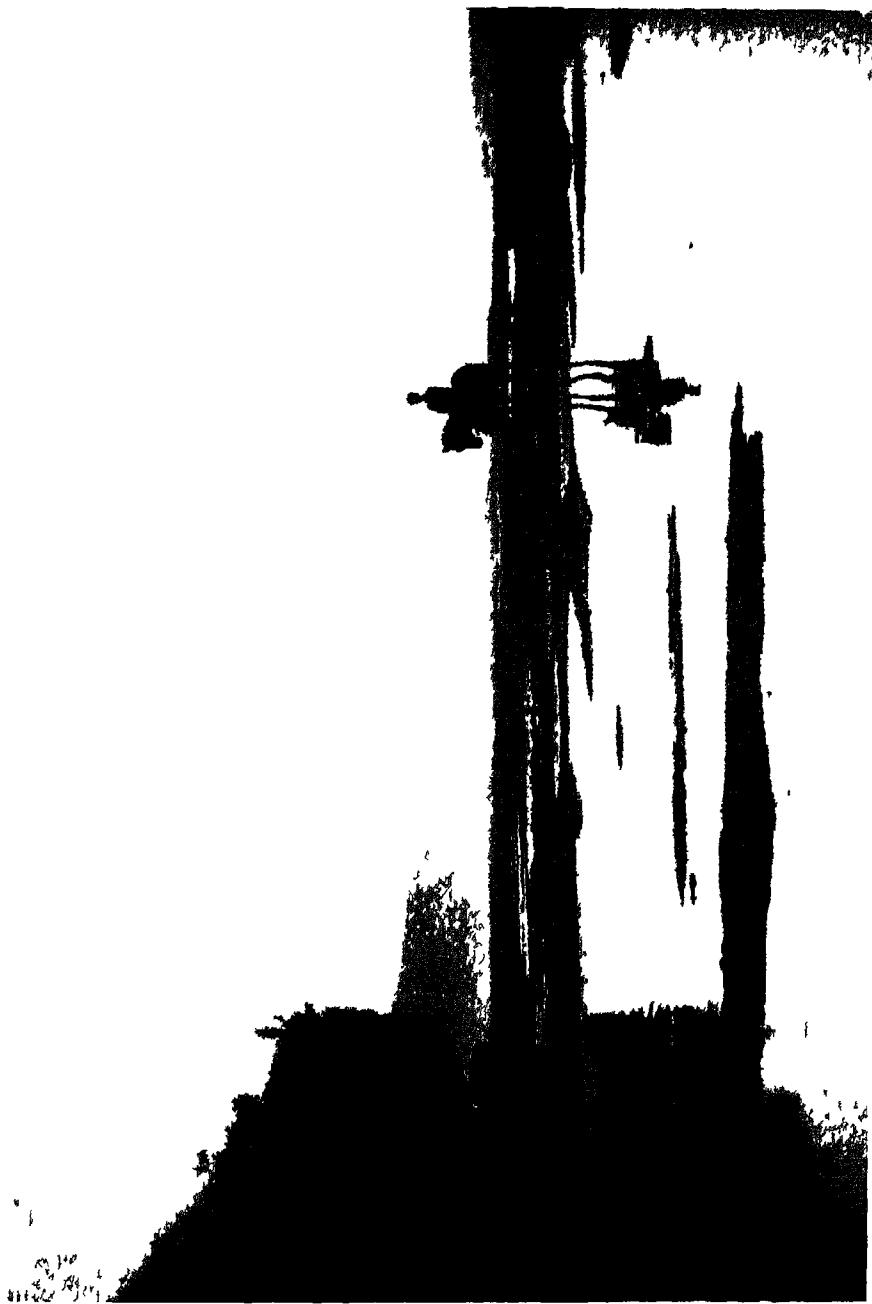


43. "Tiki"—native of the island of Rivabae

44. Tahiti—panorama of the coast



45. Coral reef uncovered at low tide

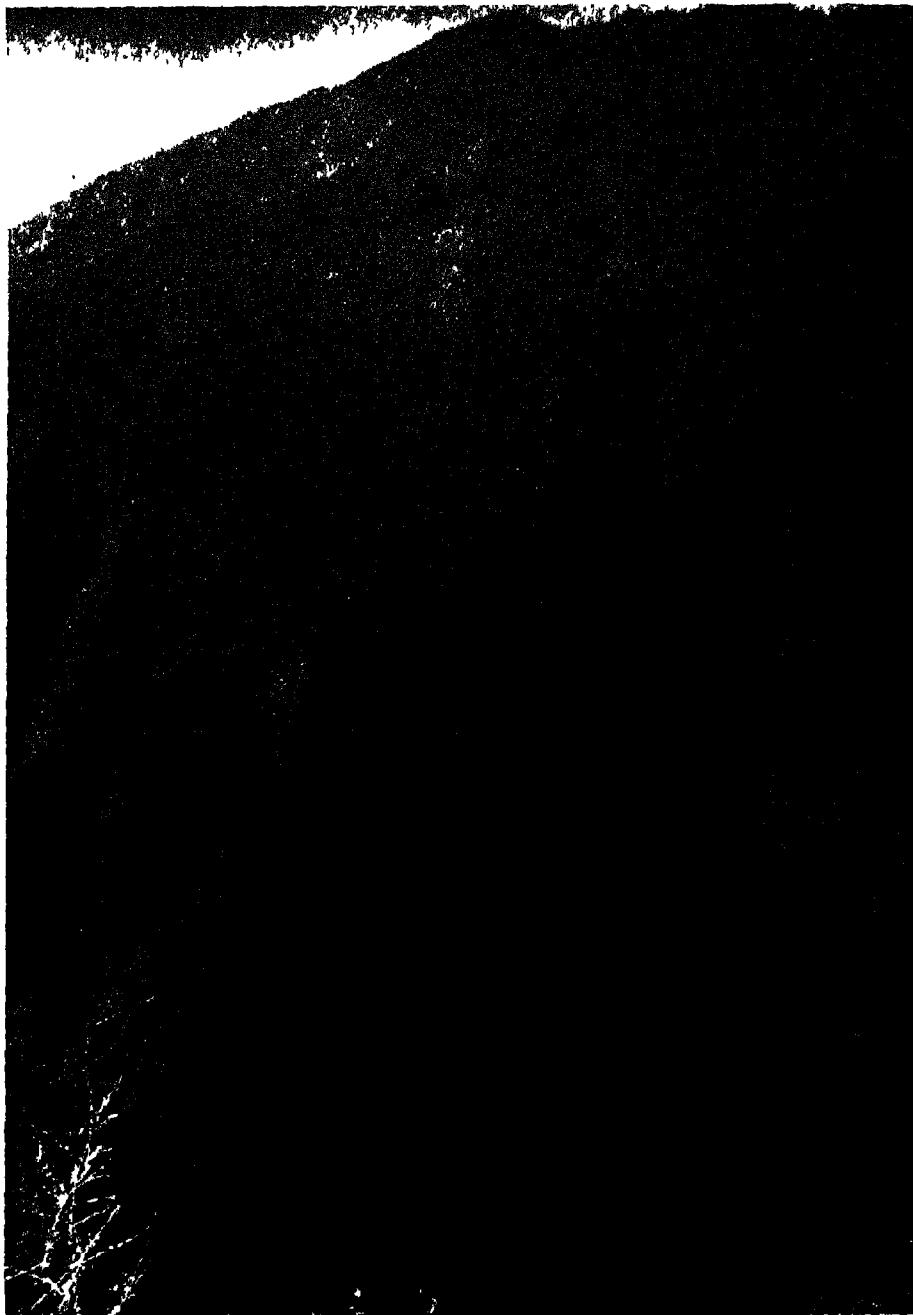


46. *On the island of Raiatea*





47. *Tahiti*—seen from the sea, in the foreground the coral reef. The mountain at the head of the valley is the “Diadem”.



48. *Mountains in Tahiti*